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Today's rockers short on role

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

Rock & Pop
by
Juan Rodriguez

"Remember the good old days" is a phrase heard often enough, particularly from those who think their generation's flaming youth did everything that could be done.

It's a phrase that is beginning to be heard in the popular youth art medium, rock 'n' roll — which as a business has been a reality for over 20 years now.

There is a resentment among veterans of Beatlemania and the golden era of psychedelia, directed against the newer generation's stars such as Elton John, Aerosmith, Kiss, et al.

They scoff because so many of the new artists represent nothing but stardom itself — glitter and bombast. The old heroes (Beatles, Dylan, etc.) represented a revolution in social mores way back in the mid-1960s.

So the debate ensues: The older generation claiming the changes they went through with rock 'n' roll were more meaningful than the instant star consumption of today's teenage generation which takes the status and availability of rock for granted.

Whereas such great songs of the mid-1960s, such as 'Like A Rolling Stone' and 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction' stand today as monumental pop statements that have no equal in the 1970s rock matrix, the older rock generation deludes itself in thinking that these songs are more potent than the entire pop process, which grinds on relentlessly producing new stars (Graham Parker, the Ramones, Bruce Springsteen, ad nauseum).

Bob Dylan is still a revered artist, but he does not have the same psychic-spiritual impact for the younger rock audience as, say, Elton John and that phantom superstar Springsteen. The times they are a changin' indeed.

What is happening with rock 'n' roll in its old age is that the industry is getting bigger, because people continue to buy records. There are so many consumers these days that the splitting of musical camps is represented by the creation of new markets.

The growth of country music, for example, is based on the generation of the 1950s who grew up on Elvis and felt alienated from latterday heavy volume rock. They wanted a beat and lyrics that can be remembered, and they get it from today's country music.

The fans who took part in the rock changes from 1964 to 1969 — who thought of the Jefferson Airplane, Dylan, the Rolling Stones and Woodstock as transcendental experiences — still cling to their old heroes, if only because the new bunch has nothing to say to them.

The new generation admits as much, because they too keep on buying records by stars who've lasted more than 10 years.

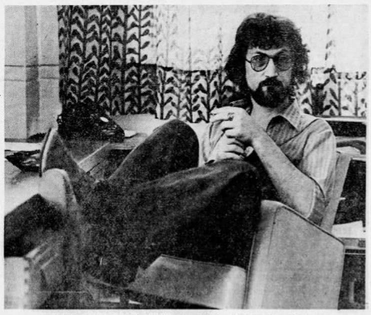
But the pop process does not grow on the exploits of rock revered elders. The attention span in rock audiences is not very wide; there must be new idols to gaze at.

It will be interesting to see how many of today's veteran rock stars are prominent 10 years from now.

The current pop group Kiss offers only stardom, no social significance

A playwright-in-residence even

Theatre school aims at more outside input



Joel Miller, newly appointed head of the National Theatre School's English acting division.

By JULIA MASKOULIS
of The Gazette

In a profession that has more than its share of helium-filled personalities floating in theatrical abstracts, Joel Miller speaks like a man whose feet touch earth.

In March Miller replaced Douglas Rain as the new director of the English acting division of the National Theatre School.

Although he has been assistant director (working with Rain) for the past three years, his affiliation with the school goes back to 1971 when he first joined staff part-time teaching improvisation and production and as guest director.

Miller is a professional director who received his training at the University of California in Los Angeles.

Almost all his professional career has been spent in Canada.

From 1966 to '68 he was production stage manager with Playhouse Theatre in Vancouver; then he was assistant director to John Hirsch and Douglas Campbell at Stratford in the summer of '68; and before moving to Montreal in '71, he spent three years with Theatre Calgary as artistic director.

Now he joins the director of the French acting section, Andre Page, and the director of production Jose Descombes, as head of one of the most outstanding training centres for actors in the country.

While he says he does not plan major changes for next year, there are areas he will emphasize. One of these is increased contact with visiting directors and working professionals, especially for third year graduating students on the lookout for jobs.

"I am never satisfied but I am relatively satisfied with what we have been doing the past three years. I want to maintain the degree of work but introduce more Canadian input," he said in an interview with The Gazette'.

Part of his plan includes a playwright-in-residence who will develop an original script with second year students. The following year the same students will perform the completed play.

"This would be as a classroom exercise showing them how an actor can contribute to a new script." The playwright also benefits by observing rehearsals and seeing the techniques employed by different directors, he added.

As intensive and gruelling as the three-year course is even for the most blindly devoted students, how realistic is their training? How well are they prepared for a career which may be partly spent waiting on tables or behind a sales counter before a break in theatre comes along?

"In terms of structure, the relationships (among actor, director and production) are essentially the same. It is very realistic. Given certain differences that might exist between any two theatres, the students could go to a professional theatre and not feel lost".

In the school's 18-year-history, about 80 per cent of graduates have retained theatrical careers — a high average for any trade school, said Miller.

Students in production courses (technical and design) have a slightly higher average, but the market for actors remains fiercely competitive.

"There is no way of preparing them for the reality of being unemployed. We talk to them about the realities, but the usual situation is that they say 'Why didn't you tell us' . . . Telling them is never as true as the real thing".

While Miller speaks optimistically about Canadian talent, he speaks with considerably less euphoria about the stage of Canadian theatre, and specifically Canadian playwrights.

"Numbers (more plays) do not make Canadian theatre stronger . . . To simply write in 1950s U.S.-type soap opera and change the place names doesn't make a Canadian play.

"A national art is an art that deals with the day-to-day problems of the people in that country and we are living in a country that is 80 per cent dominated by another country. That political domination is cultural and social domination as well.

"Canadians have an identity. A guy that is striking knows who he is and what he wants. Most playwrights are writing to a small minority and the myth of the Canadian search for identity is fabricated by a small group of intellectuals who themselves may be going through an identity crisis."

Miller and Rain have just completed auditioning the bulk of next year's applicants. Out of 270 English acting candidates, fewer than 16 will be accepted.

Act now, ask questions later is the rule for these students

By PABLO FENJVES
of Canadian Press

National Theatre School students must believe in theatre with "the faith of one who believes in God" if they wish to succeed, says Jose Descombes, the school's director of production.

And those who struggle successfully through their demanding programs are offered no more than a certificate upon completion — certainly not a job guarantee, he adds.

More than 90 per cent of the last year's applicants, competing for a chance to prove the willingness and faith Descombes speaks of, were rejected. The 1976-77 initial enrolment was 53, in keeping with the low numbers of previous years.

By September, those finally accepted "plunge directly into their work", said Descombes. "First they do what they're told, later they can ask questions.

"The students haven't the type of liberties at our professional institution that they might enjoy elsewhere," he explained. "As they say, 'The show must go on'."

Students, who have described the academic program as "terrifying", "mind-boggling", "painful" and, from one woman "deadly," take to a seemingly endless routine that leaves most of them too tired to pursue extra-curricular activities.

"By the time your day is over you're finished, dead," said Linda Corgini, a bilingual 21-year-old girl from Sudbury, Ont., enrolled in the first-year French acting course.

Aspiring actors devote their first year to training their "two instruments", voice and body. They take classes in singing, theatre history, literature, masks, fencing and branches of the martial arts, concentrating throughout on theatre interpretation.

Voice and body training continue during the second year, with modern dance and period classes added to the first-year curriculum.

The final year, while developing still further the aspirant's "two instruments", focuses on public performance. Five or six modern and classical full-scale productions are staged under the direction of visiting professionals.

Those in the two-year production courses receive training in every branch of theatre except acting. As much as Linda would like to complete her three-year program successfully, she isn't brimming over with self-confidence.

Only eight of the 18 accepted in 1974's English acting class struggled through to their final year, less than the 50 per cent who usually graduate.

Andre Page, director of the French acting course, said the demanding environment often has adverse effects on students, personalities.

"Because they have to live theatre completely, some become alienated from the outside world," Page explained.

Perhaps, as one student put it, "that's the cost of dedication.

"You can't spend that much time working and breathing and eating with other acting hopefuls and not feel like something, somewhere, is missing."

Linda said the school is "a bit like a monastery. You feel somewhat divorced from the mainstream of life . . . as if you're not part of the crowd out there," she said.

"Social life? What social life?" asked Kathy Haggis, 21, of London, Ont.

Most students complained of an almost total absence of free time but all agreed that it was time well-sacrificed.

Of the 241 students who subjected themselves last year to the school's cross-Canada auditions for the three-year English acting course, only 13 were accepted.

The French acting sector accepted 15 out of 209 aspirants, and the technical and design sections of the school's production course took 24 from a group of 121.

Six of those gaining acceptance have already left, either of their own volition or after a disappointingly revealing talk with their professors.

"The administration tries to be delicate but they have to be sincere", said Josette Couillard, a 21-year-old first-year student from Abitibi, Que. "It's a gamble and if you lose — no matter how you lose — it's going to be a blow".

SPIN OFF

Catchy folk comebacks

Ronney Abramson and John Lutz are two singer-songwriters who have been familiar figures on Montreal's coffee house scene.

Both had early and unsuccessful flirtations with recording careers. After several years with no product, both are back with folk-pop albums that had only been hinted at in their earlier work.

Abramson's new album, **Stowaway** (True North), shows how far she's come. Her singing is stronger than it ever was and her song construction and lyric writing has matured tremendously.

Stowaway's highlights include: 'Your Love Gets Me Around', a song in which Abramson makes clever use of the pop music hook; 'Long Lonely Winter' where she shows her ability to write sensitive and intelligent lyrics; 'S-T-O Please' which demonstrates that she's as comfortable with up tempo material as she is with slow songs; and 'The Best Friend I've Known' a ballad with an almost jazz orientation.

Several years ago John Lutz had several poorly produced singles released on the Gamma label. They went nowhere and an album was never released. Since then Lutz has appeared occasionally in local folk clubs and concerts and done extensive work as a guitarist in Tex Lecor's band.

Now with **Midnight & Dawn** (Philo), Lutz has a good debut album under his belt. Like Abramson, Lutz' work is commercial, folk oriented pop music. His songs are catchy, pleasant and easy to listen to. For the most part they deal with usual pop music themes.

Producer Scot Lang has surrounded Lutz with Montreal session musicians including Lang himself on piano, bass and guitar; keyboardist Ken Pearson whose electric piano work on 'Rosie' has an almost vibes like texture, and is a highlight of the record: Ville Emard veteran Rawn Bankley on slide guitar; and Fran Aiken and Estelle St. Croix, who do excellent jobs as harmony vocalists.

— MIKE REGENSTREIF

Teenage earthshatterer

Phil Spector is to American music what Orson Welles is to American cinema: A gargantuan creator who is paid lip-service but denied an active place on the contemporary scene.

Like Welles, Spector's earthshattering work (for pop, anyway) arrived early in his career.

Whereas today's artists employ producers to "improve" their sound, Spector has his own ideas — the singer and musician is nearly always subservient to a total "wall of sound".

Through the use of echo, distortion and overdubbing, he created a magic sound that lives on long after the artists listed on the disc label have faded.

Today, Spector — who started out in the music business when he was 17 and today is all of 37 — is a semi-recluse who must content himself with keeping his past flame alive, such as in the recent double-disc album release, **Phil Spector's Greatest Hits** (Warner Bros.)

Spector's themes were uncomplicated — love and individuality — but rarely has his passion been equalled.

Whereas the teenage grease of the early 1960s resides largely in the nostalgia fields, Spector's productions remain living statements. 'He's A Rebel' and 'Uptown', both by the Crystals rang clamorous but clear.

'Be My Baby' by the Ronettes literally echoed and pounded with the simple request. 'River Deep Mountain High' by Ike & Tina Turner was an unbridled expression of love, while 'You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling' by the Righteous Brothers bathed in sorrow.

Spector made it all happen with his famous "sound", comprised of well-like bass notes, castonettes and tympanis in the background, choir-like vocal overdubs, echoes on the important lyrics, echoes everywhere. No one has ever produced a sound so tumultuous.

— JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Tasty homegrown jazz

The CBC has two separate branches offering various recordings of Canadian artists including several jazz groups.

One is Radio Canada International which records for the sole purpose of distribution through catalogue sales here and abroad. The address is RCI Distribution P.O. Box 6000, Montreal.

The other branch distributes broadcast recordings which have become a part of the 'Canadian Collection' and are available to the public. The catalogue can be obtained by writing to CBC Learning Systems, Box 500, Station "A", Toronto.

Three of the recordings from the 'Canadian Collection' are of special interest since they were all recorded in 1973 and span Canada. They'll give you a good taste of national swing.

Pacific Salt (LM302 — CBC Broadcast Recording) is a seven-piece group from Vancouver with a finely polished contemporary mainstream sound.

All the compositions are originals by five of the musicians who show an uncanny ability to reflect some of the best influences in jazz, namely Cannonball Adderley's down home funk and Horace Silver's cookin'.

Roger Simard (LM301 — CBC Broadcast Recording) features the Roger Simard Nine familiar to many Montrealers.

The compositions are, again, originals by saxist Jean LeBrun trombonist Claude Blouin, Marc Belanger (violinist with the Quebec Symphony), and Francois Morel (Montreal Symphony).

Simard, an outstanding drummer, leads the band with a rare uncompromising honesty and their music is as close to the Ellington school as any band will ever get. They have a big, clean, individual sound and feature some excellent solos.

My only criticism on both these albums has to do with the album notes by Bob Bowers who, though he states that liner notes are "usually a collection of misleading opinions that should be taken with a grain of salt if not totally ignored," then proceeds to give up his perception of the music.

I would much prefer to have some biographical information on the musicians and some idea of how these groups came to be, where they work, etc. Liner notes should inform on the musicians, not the music which listeners can appreciate by themselves.

All Star Jazz In Concert at the CNE (LM300 — CBC Broadcast Recording) features 10 of the best known Torontonian jazzmen including clarinettist Phil Nimmons, vibist Peter Appleyard, trumpeter Guido Basso, reedman Moe Koffman and guitarist Ed Bickert. There as great variety in the music, from the long and beautiful 'Suite P.E.I.' by Nimmons to Gershwin's 'Fascinating Rhythm' put through some changes by vibist Appleyard.

There are some good appreciation pointers in the album notes by Phil MacKellar.

—NIGHTHAWK

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